



Born Again

David Price lives with one of the most interesting new turntables in years – Avid's Volvere Sequel...

We all know the story – vinyl's staging a comeback the like of which hasn't been seen since Take That hit the top spot again.

A format once almost universally written off as going the way of the Dodo has risen Phoenix-like from oblivion, and is now what everyone's talking about...

In fact, it's more than mere hyperbole, because the rush of new turntables, many of which are tested in this very issue, shows that countless companies are investing considerable time and money in making products to play it on – and they're all doing things rather differently to black plastic's last heyday back in the nineteen seventies.

For me, one of the most interesting brands to surface of late is Avid. Although the company's been trading since the late nineties, it now has a mature range of high end turntables, all of which show

genuinely fresh thinking on precisely what is (and what is not) needed to get the very best sound from this venerable fifty something year old format.

For me, a keen student of turntable best practice with some ideas of my own about how to (and how not to) do a record player, the Avid Volvere Sequel – at £4,600 a mid-price deck in the company's range – is a real eye opener. Above all else, what has impressed me most about this deck is designer Conrad Mas's joined up thinking, which informs every aspect of its design.

Rather than fixating on one component of a turntable, such as the motor, bearing or suspension, the Volvere Sequel exhibits current 'best practice' right across the board, and adds a twist or two. As such, unpacking, assembling and auditioning the deck proved a delight, and a constant source of eyebrow-raising pleasant surprises.

First and foremost, the Volvere

Sequel is a belt drive, which regular readers will know isn't my favourite way of spinning a disc right now, but the way the drive system has been done is such that many of the problems intrinsic to them have been eliminated by lateral thinking. As the design of this Avid shows, although the drive system is important, it's less a case of what you do and more of how you do it...

The Volvere runs a near-peripheral belt, which is closer to the ideal for belt drive in my opinion (running the belt around a small sub platter is more prone to speed stability/torque shortfall issues). Whereas some decks have high torque motors driving light platters, and most others the opposite of this, the Volvere uses a very high torque motor driving a heavy platter. The "extremely powerful" AC motor puts out 130mNm of torque, claimed to be ten times that of the Impex-type motors used on the likes of Linns and Regas, and is powered by a

split-phase quartz-locked purposed-designed power supply.

It's all very well having a seriously beefy motor, but like a high performance car it's pretty irrelevant if it can't put its power down, and this is where the next clever trick comes in. The key problem with belt drive turntables is their unstable suspension, which causes speed instability when the distance between platter and pulley changes as the stylus encounters differently modulated passages along the groove. Here, the tendency is for the subchassis to try and rotate around the bearing causing both wow and distortion. The sprung suspension doesn't just float up and down, but side to side, pitching like a boat in a choppy sea as the belt pulls it towards the motor spindle in to itself (and releases it back) as the varying drag exerted by the groove on the stylus (as the groove modulation varies) tries to find an escape path.

electrical diode. It's inverted for several reasons; crucially the point of contact is only 4mm from the record aiding rapid energy transfer, and its high centre of gravity gives stability. The point contact is made from a sapphire cup jewel and a tungsten carbide ball that rotates concentrically. The supporting shaft is 16mm diameter hardened stainless steel. Interestingly, it's self lubricating and Avid don't supply any oil for the user to add.

On top of this sits the platter which is again a little different from the norm. Instead of using a mat, which allows the record to vibrate locally or an acrylic platter which Avid says "offer impedance matching, but have the same frequency characteristics as records, exciting the resonating LP as one large vibrating mass", an NBR/Cork surface is used which is claimed to be more inert. The clamp is designed to contact the inner few centimetres of the

EMT studio deck, and the way the pulley 'wheelspinned' on start up (and indeed pulled the heavy platter up to speed so fast) was reassuring. Properly levelled, the deck felt strongly locked in place, suggesting that periodic readjustment won't be needed.

SOUND QUALITY

I often find that auditioning high end belt drives leaves me beguiled by their delicacy, finesse and subtlety but a tad underwhelmed by other aspects of their performance – put pithily, many lack 'true grit'. Not so this one, which was undoubtedly the strongest, most stable and powerful sounding rubber band spun design I've ever heard. Pithily put, the Avid Volvere Sequel is 'the belt drive Garrard 301'.

The trouble with powerful sounding decks is that they can be 'all mouth and trousers', possessed of great bombast, bluster and general attitude but so full of themselves that they gloss over the very smallest subtleties that vinyl is so rich in. With the greatest respect to our esteemed publisher and assistant ed, I find Garrards err towards this a little more than I'd like, which is why I've nailed my colours to the direct drive mast of late. Unfortunately, the results I got with the Avid were such that I feel I may have to un-nail them rather hastily.

For example, Simple Minds' 'Alive and Kicking' is an excellent torture track for a turntable, especially in highly modulated 45RPM 12" single form. There's a lot of energy in the groove, lots of crashing power chords, musical climaxes and dynamic contrasts. Other high end belt drives can sound just a little unstable, whereas I've found the 401 can be a little over exuberant and forward. The Avid pretty much got the best of both worlds; giving great solidity in the bass allied to a wonderfully neutral and open midband without a trace of hardness or opacity.

The opening electric piano chords were an ear opener, sounding less 'cracked' than anything with a belt I've heard to date. Most impressive was the clarity, and the lustrous harmonics practically 'glistening' there in front of my very ears. When the bass guitar,

"the strongest, most stable and powerful sounding belt drive design I've heard to date..."

Like SME's high end decks, Avid's answer is to lock the lateral movement of the springs, so they can move up and down but not side to side. Designer Conrad Mas has done this very simply with three rubber bands, one on each suspension turret, that severely curtail sideways movement whilst having minimal impact on the springs' ability to go up and down. This suspension design, allied to the massy plinth, round section belt and torque motor, give solid power transmission with minimal drama, and this in turn has a profound effect on the basic sound of the Avid.

These three spring turrets are built into the Volvere's base, and locating its three height adjustable feet (resting on rubber pads) on a level surface is the first part of setup. Done this way, the suspension has a low centre of gravity and each spring is equally adjusted regardless of load, giving near-perfect vertical movement at 3.5Hz when the second tier of the deck, the subchassis, is fitted. This one piece aluminium casting couples the arm mount to the bearing very directly, and has no parallel edges so as to discourage standing waves.

The Avid main bearing is curiously shaped for a reason – tapered upwards, it's designed to pass energy to the subchassis in only one direction, much like an

record, which is in turn pushed up by a raised mat centre and effectively locks the record to the main bearing, say Avid. It works simply, with a turn of the knurled knob dishing the disc down to the mat in one action.

Setting up the deck proved very straightforward, thanks in no small part to the superb packaging the turntable comes in. It's a three tier affair, like the turntable itself, and everything goes together very straightforwardly in the space of about twenty minutes. It's best to install the arm (and cartridge) onto the subchassis first, then locate the base just where you want it and drop the subchassis on, then add platter and motor.

For the purposes of this review, an SMEV was used with a Koetsu Red K Signature cartridge (with no fluid damping), and it proved a fine match, although a more neutral Lyra Titan went on later for the sake of completeness.

The build of the Avid seems faultless, although the crackle black finish of the review model lacked the flawless perfection of the gorgeous SME turntables, for example. Worst of all was the cheap plastic tonearm lead p-clip, but I understand this has now been upgraded to something more in keeping with the very high standards of the rest of the deck. In use, the Avid felt as robust as an





bass drum and snares kicked in, I was greeted with a delightfully tight, taut punch which again was totally devoid of harshness or grain. Singer Jim Kerr's melancholic strains were remarkably clear and direct, sounding far less nasal than I usually hear him. Excited, I moved on to my next torture track...

UB40's 'Don't Let it Pass You By' has a very strong, underslung bass line that can take the song down like a lead balloon when played on most belt drives. Not so the Avid, which offered up a wonderfully fleet of foot rendition of this finely recorded slice of classic reggae (the track harks from long before the shame of 'Red, Red Wine', you understand!). The song also showcased the Avid's wonderfully expansive midband, offering a deliciously wide stereo soundstage that fell back many metres too. Again, I've struggled to hear many decks that can out do Michell's Orbe in this particular respect, but the Avid was head and shoulders above it – no small feat. Likewise, it proved wonderfully dynamic, making the sometimes 'matter of fact' sounding SME sound positively profound and uncharacteristically emotionally committed to the music in hand.

Moving to some late sixties jazz and Herbie Hancock's 'I Have a Dream' on a 1969 BlueNote waxing showed the deck working consistently across a range of musics. This song is delicate and brooding, with subtle rhythms breaking through to gently push the song along. It's

the sort of music that Linn's LPI2 really shines with, and it came as a surprise to find the Volvere Sequel doing no less well. Here, I think the gently romantic sound of the Koetsu cartridge helped, but it was Avid's startling transparency and rhythmic integrity that really swung it. This deck is truly exceptional in its ability to impart the natural tone of an instrument, conveying all its intrinsic texture and lustre in its entirety without colouring it, embellishing it or indeed dulling it.

The result was a mesmerically live sound, with brass, piano and drums all sounding as if they were in the room with me. The Avid's almost supernatural solidity really came into play here too, giving the track a mastertape like feel that left me enraptured with what on lesser equipment sounds quite a mediocre recording. From down in the bass, where it's only a percentage point or two shy of my heavily modified Technics direct drive in tautness, to the midband where it's eerily translucent, icily clear and yet smooth as silk, to the treble where it is spectacularly open and atmospheric and delightfully precise, the deck was nothing but a pleasure to listen to.

Over the past few weeks I've duly been running the gamut of my not inconsiderably sized record collection. The deck is music-neutral; time and again I've found myself letting the turntable I'm reviewing dictate the music I listen to; SMEs work wonders

REFERENCE SYSTEM

Technics SL1210/Audio Origami RB250/Lyra Dorian turntable
 Michell Orbe/SME Series V/Koetsu Red K Signature turntable
 Linn LP12SE/Ekos SE/Archiva turntable
 Pioneer PL-L1000/ADC XLM turntable
 Note Products PhoNote phonostage
 Sugden IA-4 amplifier
 Yamaha NS1000M loudspeakers

with classical, Michells are a joy with electronica, Linns love rock; the Avid seemed as happy as a pig in poop with everything it was asked to play. Now numbering nearly 3,000, I rarely reach the inner recesses of my vinyl vaults these days, but this turntable had me searching out some of my least played discs.

CONCLUSION

Eagle-eyed readers may have gleaned from all this that I rather liked the Avid Volvere Sequel, and they're right. This is one of the most impressive ways to play music I've come across to date, showcasing vinyl's jaw-droppingly powerful and musical sound in no uncertain terms. My reviews of high end turntables are often full of praise but invariably tempered with some caveat or another, but here I can't really think of one. It combines the rugged build and superlative mechanical integrity of an oil rig with the delicacy, precision and finesse of the best hand-made mechanical watches.

Its sound is so neutral and open that it's almost impossible to ascribe character to; in this review, I felt I was listening to the SME Series V tonearm and Koetsu cartridge far more than the turntable.

And on a personal note, I love its lack of showiness – we're not talking acres of black Perspex or superfluous gold adornments here. Its styling, if you could call it that, is simply a function of how it does what it does. A brilliant high end turntable then; expensive – but justifiably so.

VERDICT

A high end turntable of rare completeness, it offers breathtaking all round sound from a superbly balanced belt drive chassis.

AVID VOLVERE SEQUEL £4,600

Avid Hi-Fi

+44(0)1480 457300

www.avidhifi.co.uk

FOR

- superb stability
- glassy transparency
- breathtaking dynamics
- unerring musicality
- design, packaging, set-up

AGAINST

- nothing

MEASURED PERFORMANCE

The Avid Volvere Sequel performs very well under measurement conditions. The flutter component of the measurement is particularly low, showing that the bearing and motor are well designed. As a result, the IEC-weighted wow and flutter result of 0.064% is very good.

Startup is swift, showing that the motor has plenty of torque and the speed did not waver over a period of 3-4 hours whilst warming up, although our 3150Hz test tone was recorded as 3175Hz, meaning the Volvere Sequel is running around 0.7% fast, which is

a little high and not adjustable by the user.

Apart from this small point, the Volvere Sequel measures very well and should offer a dynamic and pacy performance. AS

WOW AND FLUTTER

